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SUBJECT: KREMLIN DIRECTS UNITED RUSSIA TO "SPIN" CRISIS

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1B. 08 MOSCOW 3586

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle; reasons 1.4(b/d).

11. (C) Summary: At the instruction of Kremlin officials, United Russia is taking a more active visible role in defending Russian government actions to the Russian public. Countering the anti-import duty protests and messages which have resonated in political and media circles for weeks, United Russia has been charged by Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov with orchestrating "shows" of support for the government's decision, framing the issue as an effort to ensure employment for the tens of thousands of Russians working in the domestic auto industry rather than the smaller (wealthier) number engaged in import-export trade of foreign vehicles. This populist, protectionist message is meant to appeal to citizens' patriotism - and to maintain their continued strong support for the ruling tandem's, but especially Putin's, response to the economic crisis. End Summary.

Get On Message, And Get the Message on Air

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12. (C) Since December 4, when Vladimir Putin, in his roles as prime minister and party leader, appeared live for three hours on national television to address concerns about the economic crisis, United Russia has not communicated in any coordinated way a message of general support for Medvedev and Putin's response to Russia's economic woes. In spite of the expected slowdown in political activity at year's end, public demonstrations in the Russian Far East, as well as in St. Petersburg and the Urals region, criticizing national government decisions to increase import duties on foreign-produced autos attracted the attention of opposition political parties, including the Communist party. Worry that localized anger over import duty policy might metastasize into larger protests fed by public dissatisfaction with the speed and scale of the GOR response to the economic crisis has thus far not been confirmed by events. Nonetheless, concerns grew that United Russia was conceding the public information field to opposition groups, giving them the opportunity to shape public perceptions (albeit not via television, only through Internet, a few radio stations and some more politically balanced newspapers and magazines) of the government response to the crisis.

13. (C) Concerned by the political consequences of the continued downward trajectory of the Russian economy, United Russia brought together its national and regional leaders January 16 to strategize on a public relations campaign to back the government. Kremlin deputy chief of administration and United Russia political strategist Vladislav Surkov appealed to party leaders to organize public demonstrations in support of government actions to counterbalance opposition meetings and protests. The outline of his presentation was distributed by the party, raising concerns among some observers about the intended effectiveness of the rallies, as well as the potential for conflict.

14. (C) The latest Surkov project was launched January 24 with the first in a series of planned rallies backing government steps to address the economic crisis. The rally at the

Moscow-based "Zil" auto plant attracted approximately 2000 people marching behind banners proclaiming "We are for Putin!," and purported to demonstrate public approval of Moscow's support to the Russian auto industry. Speakers, including United Russia figures from the Moscow City Duma, the State Duma and party leadership, enjoined attendees to support the domestic auto industry by buying only Russian products. (As the print and Internet press reported, however, even some rally participants acknowledged to journalists that Russian cars like Lada are an inferior product to the cars produced by the major multinational auto manufacturers.) A rally in Yekaterinburg attracted less local attention and fewer people. More rallies are planned for January 31 to take place simultaneously with protests organized by the Communist Party and "Other Russia" in several major cities.

Anyone Paying Attention?

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¶15. (C) The question for observers was: "Why bother?" Recognizing that the Kremlin, White House and United Russia are unanimous in their desire and ability to keep opposition voices from being heard via national television, many wonder why United Russia needs to mount its own campaign of support for the government. To some, such as sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya, the government is paranoid about conceding any political space to critics. More benignly, United Russia insider Andrey Silantyev told us that the manifestations were not needed and would amount to nothing. They would be covered by major media outlets and serve as a useful prop when needed, he noted. But he was under no illusion that they would change any minds, commenting that for the time being, the government and United Russia were still confidently in charge and faced no challenge from any opposition figures or political organizations.

¶16. (C) The decision for United Russia to get behind the government comes after United Russia's three "clubs" (liberal, moderate, conservative/patriotic) came together to oppose the appeal from party leadership that the clubs set an example and impose a moratorium on staffing and pay reductions at journals and think tanks, as well as to express differences over how the government is using the Stabilization Fund. "Ekspert" editor Valeriy Fadeyev, himself moderator of the liberal "November 4" club debate sessions, told us that the call by United Russia party leaders, including Central Executive Committee Chair Andrey Vorobyev, would have amounted to suicide for businesses. It exposed concern on the part of some that people in senior party and government positions did not understand the crisis and the financial pressures they were now facing.

¶17. (C) Silantyev downplayed intra-party differences over, or lack of experience with, business development. He acknowledged that the party had no long-term economic strategy, having jettisoned the "Plan 2020," aka "Plan Putin" since it was simply impossible to contemplate what economic realities would exist in 10 years time, and people were not interested in the distant future but rather the immediate present. That said, he argued that there was surprising unanimity among the three clubs over general economic policy, including support for reducing taxes on small and medium sized businesses (proposed by Putin in November) and direct government support to certain large industries, including the auto and steel sectors, not just to financial institutions.

¶18. (C) Kryshtanovskaya went on to posit that the PR campaign is part of an attempt to insulate Putin from public discontent, and to channel blame to one or more individuals within the government. Should economic conditions worsen, she argued, United Russia through its public campaign could vent public anger and leverage the departure of senior officials, including Finance Minister Kudrin, for political advantage in March regional elections and to maintain high public approval numbers for Putin (and secondarily Qedvedev). (Note: Other leading economic thinkers have stated recently that Kudrin is too central to the country's economic

stability and that his ouster could precipitate another stock market and ruble crash. First DPM Shuvalov could be a more likely fall guy. End Note) Silantyev cavalierly argued that nothing had changed politically in Russia since May 2008 - except that the GOR had less money in the bank and with that, fewer carrots. "Russia does not need any more PR right now. People are apathetic and will not challenge the government. The only thing it needs is more money to survive this crisis.

And no one knows where that is going to come from," he concluded.

Comment

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19. (C) United Russia's PR effort gives it a start on campaigning for its candidates in March regional elections. While most analysts discount the need for these cheerleading sessions, others are concerned about the potential for clashes with opposition supporters on the street at the same time. We expect security forces to keep pro and anti-government marchers apart. Still, the overt PR masks concern in the party that the economic crisis will be deeper than expected and "blame" will have to be assigned to, and borne by, someone in government/party leadership. While United Russia's national preeminence is in no imminent danger from other parties, its Putin-derived legitimacy may suffer and require an infusion of support possibly from a PR effort to shift blame to other officials.

BEYRLE